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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the importance of reading in developing writing competence in an intensive Business Spanish course at the University of Toledo (Ohio). In class projects, two groups of students wrote business reports in which they advised a company on whether or not to market a product in a Spanish-speaking country. The projects each included five short papers covering the background of the company; the product to be marketed; and the socio-political, economic, and cultural environment of the country. In addition, the project contained student recommendations for marketing and an advertisement to introduce the product. Students reported regularly on their research. Oral and written feedback was provided primarily on content and methods. One group received authentic materials to read, discuss, and review at length, and also were exposed to literary materials in Spanish. Students in the group not emphasizing reading (non-reading) had more frustration than the other (reading) group in writing assignments, while the reading group students reached much higher writing proficiency levels and were enthusiastic about their projects. Both groups found writing exercises and cultural information helpful. Overall, results suggest that reading has a positive impact on writing skill development. Further research is recommended. (MSE)

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The Role of Reading in Teaching Business Writing[1]

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The purpose of this study is to present the results of a study I conducted during the winter quarter as a part of the Spanish writing-intensive courses at the University of Toledo, Ohio. I decided to conduct research on this topic because the writer of business Spanish needs to use a structured set of vocabulary and formats. Studies on Spanish methodology that I have examined thus far deal mainly with composition in Spanish language courses and do not address business writing. Since experts have suggested that writing competence is acquired through reading (Dvorak: 154), I have attempted to determine the impact of reading on business Spanish writing.

First, I will describe how the study was conducted. I asked two groups (A and B) of students to write a business report. In their reports the students had to advise a company whether or not to market a product in a Spanish-speaking country. Classes for group A met for one hour, four times a week. Classes for group B met for two hours, twice a week.

The project was divided into five short papers. Papers covered the background of the company, the product to be marketed, and an overview of the socio-political, economic and cultural environment of the country where the product was going to be sold. The report included students' recommendations on whether or not this market (country) should be targeted. In addition, the students had to write an ad to introduce their product to the market. Students received written instructions in English for the assignment during the first week of class.

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To prepare these papers students conducted library research, discussed their findings with their peers and the instructor, reported orally on the progress of their work and submitted several drafts of their papers. Students gave progress reports every two weeks and their peers asked questions and gave suggestions.

During the first two weeks of class, students conducted preliminary research and decided on a country and a product. At the end of those two weeks students gave a brief oral presentation in which they explained the country, the product and the reasons for their choices. Next, they submitted their first draft of the paper which dealt with some background on the country they were going to investigate.

Following the guidelines suggested by Valdés, Dvorak and Hannum I gave my students feedback mainly on content. In part it was possible to concentrate on content rather than on spelling because the students themselves proofread and corrected mistakes using a computerized dictionary available at the language lab. This saved a great deal of time in grading compositions and reduced the number of corrections on the papers. I tried to make content feedback as interactive as possible by asking students specific questions as if I were talking to each student individually. I used phrases such as : Perdón, no entiendo, ¿puedes explicar esto de otra manera? ¿Por qué?¿Para qué? ¿Podrías leer tu texto y organizar mejor las ideas?

To ensure consistent feedback on grammar and vocabulary I came up with the following checklist of structures based on Valdés, Dvorak and Hannum :

Ser/estar

Pret./Imperf.

Concord.: Subject/verb agreement; noun,adj,art. agreement

Tiempo verbal

Por/para

Art.: missing article

Orden

Diccionario u Otra expresión

?/rewrite/see me

In addition to the written feedback given to both groups, I met with students individually to discuss comments. Also, I explained how to use the dictionary effectively. In some specific cases I asked students to come to my office to go over problem areas a second time.

I did not require students in the first group, Group A, to read samples, although I explained the structural organization of business reports to both groups. I designed and implemented daily activities to develop listening, speaking and reading skills. One unit was related to business and helped students to review basic vocabulary. Several activities were designed and implemented to give students the opportunity to use the vocabulary in context. Group of students had to talk about their buying habits. I assigned descriptions of commercials using clippings from American magazines as homework. Although students in this group had to read some texts, these texts were not related to topics covered in reports.

Other class activities with this group included viewing and discussing of TV commercials in Spanish. There was one brief in-brief writing assignment per week based on the topics we had previously discussed in class. Students wrote on a specific topic for ten minutes and then received feedback from their peers and the instructor. In some cases they shared their ideas with the rest of the class.

Group B received a package with models of business reports, articles and commercials that they read at home or in class. Authentic texts were carefully selected. Readings passages included fragments of socioeconomic and

demographic aspects of countries; business letters, articles and commercials introducing new products in a market, articles describing markets; articles on economics about Latin America. I also assigned each student an article and commercials that dealt with the product about which she/he was doing research.

While I was conducting the project (particularly when I read their very first drafts) I realized that most of the students were not familiar with reading strategies in the foreign language and they do very little reading even in English. The first draft showed that they were trying to translate and some of their fragments were totally incomprehensible. After talking to them, they admitted that they were using sources in English and that they had not consulted the sources in Spanish that I had suggested. For that reason, it was necessary to devote some class time to teach students how to read a text in Spanish. I started working with prereading activities using magazine commercials and brief articles (one or two paragraphs). Before reading the written texts we worked with the pictures and students described what they saw. Then we moved to the actual reading.

After they felt comfortable with short passages, I brought two-to three page articles to class. I worked with students with prereading exercises. I took advantage of the pictures, charts, and subtitles as much as possible. I explained some key vocabulary items when absolutely necessary. In the case of articles dealing with new technology, many expressions used in the text were in English. I asked the students to skim through texts, locate specific information in a passage, and answer questions based on the reading.

To help students in group B analyze and become familiar with the different models, each week I set aside specific time for in-class reading and discussion of the texts. After discussions I asked students to imitate and adapt the structured set of formats and specific vocabulary of business writer's models

when they write their own reports as Dvorak (161) suggested. I asked students to read advertisements in Spanish in silence followed by brief discussion. Then students were asked to write an ad for their product and to imitate its style. Later in the quarter students read several articles about introductions of new products. One follow-up activity required students to list expressions they could use in their reports. Another activity asked the class as a group to discuss the meaning of these expressions and give specific examples of how they could incorporate those expressions in their texts.

In addition to the texts already mentioned students were exposed to other genres, such as poetry, stories, plays that deal with the sociopolitical situation in Spanish speaking countries in Latin America and I assigned these as home reading to be later discussed in class. Furthermore, one hour a week was devoted to grammar review in context. I designed exercises based on texts we had already discussed.

Conclusions

The students in both groups complained that the first assignment and its subsequent rewrite were the hardest. Students in group A who did not read related articles and commercials showed much frustration. Some wanted to drop the class. As the instructor, it was very difficult for me to give feedback based on content due to language mistakes in group A. Some chunks were written in English. In many cases whole compositions had to be rewritten, because they were totally incomprehensible. Since they did not have the vocabulary they tried to do literal translations of information gathered from sources in English. Final drafts showed lack of business formulas, abundant "made-up" expressions, and serious mistakes when they attempted to use more complex structures.

With a few exceptions (students who already had a good command of written Spanish), topics were not well developed. Papers were shorter: an average of 3.5 page long. At the end of the quarter I noticed that in most cases there was very little improvement. This was the group that demanded more support and encouragement of the two under study.

On the other hand, most papers of the students in group B reached near native proficiency. These students gained a sense of the language, the business style, and specific vocabulary. Throughout the revisions I noticed few dictionary mistakes. The texts are longer and better developed in terms of content and complexity of grammatical structures. Papers had an average length of 9.5 pages. All students in this group developed their topics well. They attempted to use more complex structures and specific vocabulary. They were very enthusiastic about their projects.

Both groups reported that in class writing exercises were helpful since they obtained instant feedback. Also, students in both groups reported that they had learned much about a Spanish-speaking country and about other Spanish-speaking countries' cultures. They also admitted that the project had helped them with vocabulary and grammar. They liked the fact that they could correct and add to the paper. They thought that it was a very good idea to start the paper from the very beginning in that way they had plenty of time to revise it. Breaking the project into parts made the project seem easier and more organized. Students also stated that turning in the assignment in parts made it less stressful at the end of the quarter. It helped them to receive continuous feedback throughout the writing process because they could go back and correct their mistakes, ask questions, and keep adding new sections to their texts. Group B stated that reading of advertisements and listing of phrases from articles was very helpful.

The study I have conducted suggests that there is a positive impact on writing due to reading; however, since my sample is small, further research is needed with different themes and for a longer period of time.

Notes

1. This paper was read at 1991 Languages and Business Conference, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, Michigan

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